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Elaine E. Cherney

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A COLLEGE READING TEACHER AND THE DYSLEXIC STUDENT

Elaine E. Cherney
Michigan State University

Statistics from H.E.W. indicate that there are approximately eight million school children in the United States who do not learn to read by conventional instructional strategies. (1) Of these, about ten per cent of elementary students are categorized as dyslexic. (2) That is, these students having reading disabilities that are not caused by retardation, emotional disturbances, aphasia or any diagnosable-disorder.

At this time there are no reliable figures as to what per cent of college students can be classified as dyslexic (3) but those of us who are involved in college reading programs know that there are increasing numbers of dyslexic students being admitted to post-secondary institutions of higher education.

The entrance of the dyslexic or severe reading handicapped into the colleges and universities poses some unique problems for the institution, the college reading specialist and the dyslexic student. Unlike the blind, the deaf or the physically handicapped the dyslexic student manifests no outward clues to the handicap and the cause of the problem cannot be specified. Thus, unless the student is classified as dyslexic as soon as he/she is admitted there is no way of knowing that the student has a problem until the student seeks help. While there are some post-secondary institutions of higher education that are geared toward special support for the dyslexic or learning handicapped (see the list in *Learning Disabilities - A family Affair* by Betty Osman - Random House, 1979) most institutions do not provide a support system for the dyslexic.

The first step towards providing a support system for the dyslexic is to identify the student. If they are identified at admission, then usually the college reading instructor will know who the student is and will have agreed to provide a support system. If your institution adheres to an open admissions policy, identification is more difficult and the student will either self-select for help or will be re-

ferred by a frustrated professor "who just can't seem to help this student". How do you know that the student is a dyslexic?

If the student has very severe language skills deficits, you can infer that the student may be dyslexic. Lerner (4) states that dyslexia is a disorder where the student has failed to attain the skills of reading and writing despite conventional experience. Bannatyne (5) uses the term to cover the category of reading and spelling disabilities for which there is no obvious cause. These students are able to learn using other strategies and their capacities for learning is average or above. (6)

Just as a doctor makes a diagnosis you must systematically collect all the data you can and then program treatment that can help the dyslexic student succeed in college. Some clues to look for are illegible handwriting, slowness of reading speed, inability to handle reading assignments, a history of remedial work in grade school and high school, slow speech development, an inability to handle time, a lack of fine motor control, especially using a pencil, and poor ability to memorize. While these symptoms do not always indicate a dyslexic, they do suggest that dyslexia may be a reason for poor performance.

If you give the student a reading test, it will have to be untimed. Also, take a writing sample. Writing is difficult for them and usually very inadequate. If you conclude that the student can neither read or write, then you will have to program the student for the same kind of support a blind student would receive, such as the taping of lectures, readers, and tests given orally and papers dictated.

The dyslexic student usually needs a basic skill tutoring program that utilizes a multi-sensory approach. Modifying strategies suggested by Fernald, (7), Gattengo, I.T.A., Gillingham (8) can be very useful. There is no one specific approach because each student's need is so different. In addition to basic skills the student will usually need a content tutor.

The student must be made to realize that although the institution can provide support the student must be willing to take a modified schedule of courses and to make sure that each professor realizes that he/she is a handicapped student.

Should you teach the student to read and write if he/she is a non-reader? This is a more difficult problem to answer because it will depend on your resources and the student's time. If you feel that this is a worthwhile procedure, then try. Remember that most of these students have had "phonics" for long periods of remediation. Fernald's techniques or variations seem to work.

The learning strategy used most often in colleges and universities is that of text-lecture. This of course requires good visual-auditory skills. Therefore, anything you can do to increase the student's performance in these modalities can only help. The Learning Assessment Survey included in the appendix is an easy tool to use to determine which modality the student tends to utilize. I have used it and have found the results to be fairly accurate. In analyzing the results you need to note those students who deviate strongly from the visual modality. It is the student with an inadequate use of the visual modality who may fall into the dyslexic category.

The college student whose primary problems are deficits in reading, writing and spelling has tremendous hurdles to overcome if he/she is going to succeed. Those of us who mentor these students need to be aware of the symptoms of dyslexia, the various kinds of remedial approaches to try, the resources of the school and community that can be pulled together and above all be supportive and realistic with the student. The dyslexic student can succeed in college but it will be a hard climb.

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